THE BOOKER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF *HOTEL DU LAC*

Anita Brookner

Strangers

'No one writes with more skill and honesty about the human condition, and this book is possibly her finest' **_Observer_**

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY TESSA HADLEY

Praise for Anita Brookner

'Nothing less than brilliant, often highly amusing and, ultimately, life-affirming' *Sunday Telegraph*

'Each book is a prayer bead on a string, and each prayer is a secular, circumspect prayer, a prayer and a protest and a charm against encroaching night' Hilary Mantel

'The beauty and precision of Brookner's writing is rightly praised each time she publishes a novel, but what is less often remarked on is her daring . . . Like Graham Greene, she draws the reader into a world that has a character and signature all of its own . . . Brookner's wry, dry lightness of touch creates a bloom on the darkness of her characters' sufferings . . . *Strangers* is a novel of sober brilliance, and the unerring, unflinching Brookner is still a much-underestimated novelist'
Helen Dunmore, *The Times*

'No one writes with more skill and honesty about the human condition and this book is possibly her finest' *Observer*

'A novel of great stylistic beauty and psychological truth . . . The pitiless depiction of the final stages of life – and the refusal to allow her characters any consolation – makes *Strangers* as great a reflection on fear and regret as Philip Larkin's poem "Aubade" or Beckett's *Endgame*' *Guardian*

'Consistently absorbing . . . In the hands of a lesser novelist, her stories of human frailty would be depressing, but she manages to make them sparkle with life – and always with hope' *Daily Telegraph*

'*Strangers* is, in its own way, definitive . . . Brookner has given classic expression to what she sees to be a central truth of the human condition, absolute loneliness at the last . . . Nothing less than a great horror story' *Evening Standard*

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'Anita Brookner is a distinguished and defiant writer whose books occupy a unique place in English literature. Her subject is the best one: the definition of human nature. Although her novels often convey the loneliness inherent in the human condition, they do so in such an acute and bold way that loneliness itself is shown to be a state as tempestuous and startling as any other sort of crisis. In Brookner's hands, in her descriptions so vivid and exact, it can be exhilarating . . . Her books are unfailingly well-written, they give voice and a sense of fierce entitlement to a sort of existence that might otherwise go unrecorded . . . Brookner's is a literature that may be harsh but it is absolutely necessary' *Independent*

'Paul Sturgis is a brilliant and affecting creation by a writer whose empathy runs deep, and whose pitch is perfect . . . A brisk and moving story' *Spectator*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anita Brookner was born in south London in 1928, the daughter of a Polish immigrant family. She trained as an art historian, and after holding a post as a professor at Cambridge University and spending several years in Paris, she worked at the Courtauld Institute of Art until her retirement in 1988. She published her first novel, *A Start in Life*, in 1981 and her twenty-fourth, *Strangers*, in 2009. In 1984, she won the Booker Prize for her novel *Hotel du Lac*. As well as fiction, Anita Brookner has published a number of volumes of art criticism. She was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1990. She died in 2016 at the age of 87.

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Strangers

ANITA BROOKNER

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‘For all its glory England is a land for rich and healthy people.
Also they should not be too old.’

Sigmund Freud, London, 1938

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Author's Note

All the characters in this novel are imaginary. But I do not doubt that somewhere, out there, they, or others like them, exist.

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Introduction

Strangers is Anita Brookner's last novel, her twenty-fourth, published in 2009 when she was eighty; after it she wrote only one short novella, *At the Hairdresser's*. The terrain of *Strangers* is the one she made her own, across her long career. Paul Sturgis – retired from his work in a bank, unmarried and in his seventies – walks and walks the streets of London. Brookner's characters must have worn a groove in those pavements: so many of them, in so many novels, are driven out from their lonely flats to walk for miles until they're tired. They hunger for the 'blessed anonymity of the street'; they want to look in, through lighted windows at dusk, at other people's more satisfactory-seeming lives; they want to be part of the crowd of those who have something to do and somewhere to go. Paul goes into a hotel or café to buy coffee or to eat, although we get the impression that, like most of Brookner's protagonists, he doesn't eat much; Sarah, his long-ago lover, comments that he doesn't put on weight. He takes short trips away, to Venice and to France, and longs for the light and warmth in those places, but always returns to London. He bought his West Hampstead flat when he was much younger, in a surge of hopefulness, escaping from the gloom of his parents' house, believing he could change his life or at least take control of it. Now the flat is a part of his problem, it seems to him *unheimlich*, 'it was not home'; at night he revisits in his thoughts, to get himself to sleep, those childhood rooms he once thirsted to get away from.

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This is the fateful circling of desire: Paul's need to get away succeeded by his longing to return. His need for contact and friendship is followed by retreat, wanting his precious solitude back again. He turns over and over a dream of marriage, and seems almost abject at first, in relation to the three women in the book – Sarah, his cousin Helena, and his new acquaintance Vicky Gardner, whom he met on the plane to Venice. He's hungry for someone to be interested in what he thinks and feels: it was 'a terrible thing to live without witnesses'; 'How was one to be known?'. These women are all domineering, and use him for their own ends; and yet isn't that what he does with them too, in imagination? There's a chill in his perception of them. He isn't really kind, beyond a certain dutiful point: he pulls back from any revelation of their weakness, keeping himself intact when he might have pushed forward into intimacy. He's punctilious in his visits to Helena yet half despises her, as she seems to half despise him; he sees through her pretence that she's busy with many friends. There's plenty of irony in the novel at the deviousness of desire, which may not want what it thinks it wants. (Paul's longing to be known, incidentally, feels like a part of his masculinity. Abject women, in other Brookner novels, are perhaps satisfied with less, with being seen – though they don't often get that either.)

Arthur, caretaker of Helena's flat, knows exactly what Paul doesn't know: 'what he wanted and how to get it'. There's a foil, in so many of the novels, to the sensitive, hopeful, disappointed and subtly discriminating protagonist: an invader whose character is quite opposite. Vicky Gardner is much younger than Paul, attractive and confident but a bit crass, separated from her husband and temporarily homeless, inflicting herself on friends, leaving her bags inconveniently at Paul's flat. We only see her through his eyes; he's exasperated and contemptuous, yet can't quite resist her claim on

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him. Her casual negligence – she offers to sleep with him as carelessly as offering a cup of tea – excites him even as he deplores it. She isn't remotely interested in what he thinks and feels. If Paul's all tormented intelligence and unfulfilment, then Vicky is buoyant, vivid, stupid life itself: he derides her and marvels at her.

I'm exaggerating how much terrain Brookner's novels have in common; there's actually great variety in her scenes, her characters. A few of the novels are set in the past, they're more often focused on women than men, some of her protagonists are married, some are young, a few have children. And yet – more than for most novelists perhaps – her books do converge upon a certain mood, a certain geography, certain patterns of thought, certain recurrent dreads. And *Strangers* seems to express – as is fitting for her last novel – some essence or archetype in her work. Like Paul Sturgis, her characters are always bourgeois and usually have money, they have worldly polish, they stay in good hotels. Suffering and intelligent, with a rarely responsive imagination, they set out to meet life, hoping for happiness, but are unable somehow to belong. Often this condition of estrangement is accounted for, at least to some extent, by the fact that they're Jewish: both male protagonists in her brilliant *Latecomers*, for instance, came to England as child refugees, leaving their parents behind for ever in Germany. Brookner was born in London but her parents were Jews from Lithuania. It feels likely that Paul and Helena in *Strangers* are Jewish, though it isn't stated explicitly.

Describing the novels in bald terms of plot can't come near what it is in Brookner's writing that's so addictive, fascinating, pleasure-giving. It's the old paradox: the more this novelist writes her characters into their bleak corner, the more her readers get their delight. The squeeze of their sadness is so exquisite, in her language. And it's all funny too: the dry, wry

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comedy of Paul's unfulfilled life and his hope, which refuses to quite die; the absurdity of Vicky's bags with their pointless contents, high-heeled boots and a radio with a dead battery. Brookner's subject matter is distinctive because her words and sentences are utterly distinctive on the page. There's no one else who renders quite like this – in her meandering, remorseless narrative line, forging forward through the novel's time – the texture of an inner life, the perpetual rumination of self. Paul's moods and his convictions are radically unstable, an adventure in themselves, each momentary position delivered in its place on the page with an authority as though it were final. Our impressions assert themselves as final, for as long as we live them, before our minds and our lives move on.

Paul may be skewered as a failure in his own opinion – and in the judgement of his three women – but the reader can't get enough of these savoury, crisp sentences describing what goes through his mind. He wants someone to be interested in his inner life, which seems closed to those around him: well, here writing does its work, and Brookner's readers are more than interested. His mysterious life, so narrow and so deep and so invisible, gets its wonderful expression and vindication in the world. Brookner said in an interview that she wrote 'because of a terrible feeling of powerlessness'; 'I felt I was drifting and obscure, and I rebelled against that.' (She's superbly original in interviews: 'I wish I could cry, scream, stamp, make myself felt, but I can't.') What a confessional writer she is! Yet there's never a word wasted, no excess of lonely longing or abasement that isn't contained inside her irony, her wit, her high style: 'because it's form that's going to save us all'. And what power there is in this story of weakness, put so nakedly and whole upon the page.

Tessa Hadley

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I

Sturgis had always known that it was his destiny to die among strangers. The childhood he remembered so dolefully had been darkened by fears which maturity had done nothing to alleviate. Now, in old age, his task was to arrange matters in as seemly a manner as possible in order to spare the feelings of those strangers whose pleasant faces he encountered every morning – in the supermarket, on the bus – and whom, even now, he was anxious not to offend.

He lived alone, in a flat which had once represented the pinnacle of attainment but which now depressed him beyond measure. Hence the urge to get out into the street, among those strangers who were in a way his familiars, but not, but never, his intimates. He exchanged pleasantries with these people, but had learned, painfully, never to stray outside certain limits. The weather was a safe topic: he listened carefully to weather forecasts in order to prepare himself for a greeting of sorts should the occasion arise, while recognizing the absurd anxiety that lay behind such preparations, and perhaps aware that his very assiduity counted against him, arousing irritation, even suspicion. But codes of conduct that had applied in his youth were now obsolete. Politeness was misconstrued these days, but in any event he had never learned to accommodate indifference. Indifference if anything made him more gallant, more courteous, and the offence was thus compounded. And these were the people he relied upon to see him out of this world! Exasperation might save him, though that too must be discreetly veiled, indulged only in

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private. Hence the problem of finding fault with those whose job it would be to dispose of him.

He had read somewhere that Stendhal, his one-time favourite writer, had collapsed in the street, been taken to a cousin's house, and had died. That was the way to go, the relative, whether liked or disliked, put in charge. And the point being, not that the relative was held in fond esteem, or otherwise, but that he lived two minutes away from the accident. Thus had chance favoured the great writer who had surely never seen himself as an invalid, had in fact survived the retreat from Moscow. It was therefore essential to possess not only a relative but a relative who would prove to be near at hand. Sturgis had a relative, a cousin by marriage, but she (not a capable he) lived in north London, whereas he was in South Kensington, as distant as it was possible to be. He had even considered moving, particularly on days when the smiles faded from faces after his all too valiant greeting. Surely north London would be more festive, under the Jewish influence? His relative had on several occasions impressed him with stories of how well she was regarded in the neighbourhood, how obliging her acquaintances were, how respected she seemed to be. These attentions had made her not grateful but, rather, imperious, as if the favour were hers. What confidence, he marvelled. He visited her for the entertainment value: his presence, on such occasions of display, seemed to be acceptable, although he suspected she disliked him, as being not quite a man, too given to flattery. His defence against this was his perception that she might be lonely, her local eminence a fiction behind which she took shelter, and himself a useful idiot whose job it was to subscribe to the myth. Exasperation was also present on these occasions, but he was careful to control this until he was safely on his way home. The indifferent faces of his fellow passengers on the bus consoled

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him, since these were in a way familiar. His lot was ineluctably cast among them, though he trembled at the prospect, for the habit of trust had been lost many years ago, and had in any case been fugitive.

Trust also meant faith, but this he had never possessed. Throughout the obedient years of childhood he had privately observed that God was unjust, or, even worse than that, He was indifferent. To the pronouncement, I am that I am, went the unspoken addendum, Deal with it. Boasting to Job of His omnipotence, His superiority to Job's peaceable sinless life, He offered no justification for any of this, merely issued a report. And Job had acceded, perhaps because it is preferable to be inside than outside, silently making his accommodation with the idea of injustice, of disproportion. And had been rewarded for his docility with the restoration of his fortune, as if he had agreed to let bygones be bygones. Perhaps he, Sturgis, might have been so tempted, had there been any sort of manifestation. That there never had been any such thing brought a certain comfort, but also an anxiety: was he not worthy? That was the feeling that had lasted, the true legacy of any attempt at a spiritual dimension to his existence. Thus he was truly bereft.

This Sunday, like all Sundays, was far too long. It was the prospect of the endless fading afternoon that had prompted the telephone call to Helena, his relative, the widow of the cousin with whom he had been on affectionate terms. He had felt sorry for her, knowing how difficult it is to live alone, thinking that women felt this more than men. He would have behaved towards her with all his customary, and customarily thwarted affection, had she not made it clear that his role was to be an inferior one, as a recipient rather than as an equal. So he usually resigned himself to a cool-headed appraisal of her folly (and of his), would listen to her accounts of her many

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friends, among whom was one she referred to as 'my tame professor', and whose function in her life was unclear; there were also her partners at the bridge club – 'the girls' – and the neighbours who invited her to dinner ('They make such a fuss of me I don't like to let them down'). There was no need to reply to any of this, nor was there much possibility of doing so. He supposed that she received some reassurance from this recital. As for himself, it may have been something of a relief to spend time in her comfortable flat, to be served a cup of tea rather than to make one for himself, and even to note that this performance never varied. Yet he could see from her restless hands that she was as little at ease on these Sundays (and no doubt on other days) as he was, and that his visits served some sort of purpose. That, he supposed, was why they continued, were in fact seen as inevitable by both parties. They had respect for ancient contractual arrangements, if for nothing else.

And then he perceived the innocence behind such self-regard, the same innocence that fatally coloured his own character, his longing for reciprocity. He perceived it in Helena's boast of her own desirability, even more in her absolute refusal to give weight to his own life and habits. His presence in her flat was her only sight of him, her only knowledge of him: beyond these apparitions he was assumed to dematerialize. He knew that any attempt to discuss matters of general interest would be thwarted; even his health was a taboo subject, since her own would naturally take priority. He could see that behind her greeting, which was genuine, was the wish that he would not stay long. He also knew that when he was safely on the threshold, his scarf wound round his neck, she would bestow the same lavish smile, clasp his hand firmly, kiss his cheek, and urge him to let her have news of him. Yet when the door closed and he could hear keys being inserted into locks he sensed gratitude for his departure.

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But each was the other's only relative, and somewhere in each consciousness was the memory of a family party or a celebration of some sort, now long gone. Tolerance was now the mode; there would be no sons or daughters round their deathbeds, a subject studiously avoided and valiantly concealed. Also they were the same age, give or take a few months, and in these latter days they would not altogether forgo one another, although they had become increasingly aware that love was lacking, or even friendship. This was an organic relationship, an attachment between survivors who happened to share one or two memories. In such situations feeling, or indeed sentiment of any sort, was secondary. Should either ever be so imprudent as to express sorrow or longing, an important breach in their civility would have taken place. So the polite pretence survived, more on his side than on hers, for he scarcely burdened her with a single thought of his own, knowing that her own preoccupations would occupy the time at their disposal, and each accounting the visit a success if nothing in the way of protest were evinced.

There was regret as well as relief in their leavetaking. They both knew that they might see no one until the following day, after a solitary night into which anguish had easy access. They made a mutual pact to behave well, though good behaviour was not now much appreciated. As soon as he left her dignified apartment building he imagined the smile fading from Helena's face, as it would now fade from his own. Out in the street he made a conscious effort, always, to straighten his back, so as to appear resolute and confident should anyone be watching. But he was in the darkness of a winter evening and there was no one about. He was frugal with money and rejected the idea of a taxi: he had never been an enthusiastic driver. Besides, the bus was more companionable, more democratic; he liked to share some experiences, though not others.

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And urban landscapes had always thrilled him; he had spent all his holidays in cities, content with a glimpse of other people's domesticity. A child on a skateboard, an elderly couple arm in arm, a mother and daughter deep in conversation would furnish him with material for reflection, though this was sometimes unwelcome. Such sights were somehow more picturesque when noted in Italy or France, but even in England there were plenty of lighted windows into which he was careful not to peer, though he could not always prevent himself from stealing a brief glance. His habits were ineradicably solitary, a fact he could not hide either from himself or from others. Only Helena appeared not to find him out of the ordinary.

A car passing down the deserted street seemed to exhale a wistfulness which he was careful not to examine. This, he was aware, was not how a grown man, indeed an elderly man, should be feeling. Elderly men still had thoughts of love, even of passion, but he had loved too unwisely in his youth, and the experience had left him disheartened. As it was he no longer looked at women in the same way. His appraisal was offered not to those who were still attractive, but to those who were no longer beautiful and who had lost their assurance and their pride. His smile was invariably met with an air of scorn; he had learned that plain women are unwilling recipients of sympathy. At least with Helena there was no danger of mixed messages; they were resigned to each other, and although in many ways deploring their association managed a cordiality that might have deceived an outsider into thinking it heartfelt but which each knew privately to be short of the real thing. Indeed, waiting for his bus, as he always did on these Sunday evenings, he felt his good intentions fade, to be replaced by a sour resignation. But that he hastened to ascribe to this particular Sunday melancholy – the dark street, the

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unmoving lifeless trees, the unseasonable mildness – and invariably tried to look forward to the following day, when he would resume his activities, such as they were, with his smile once more in place.

What he admired about Helena, and would have liked to emulate, was her ringing endorsement of her own worth, or perhaps self-worth. His own reflections tended in the opposite direction. He was aware that despite the passage of time his failures were all intact, as if the primitive mind persisted throughout later events and came into its own in what must be the latter part of his life. 'We pass this way but once,' she would remark with a fine smile, while recounting a minor act of kindness – her own – to which he took care to respond with a smile of equal complicity. 'I keep open house,' she always said, when he complimented her on her hospitality. And 'I like to leave a good impression,' she said, when he told her she was looking well. Her appearance was on the whole good, if you ignored the thickening ankles, the thinning hair. In the course of the afternoon her left eyelid would begin to flicker, signifying weariness or fatigue, yet the hair was golden, the silk scarf arranged so carefully round her throat of fine quality. He also admired the unstinting formality that was his own preferred form of behaviour. Not only would there be tiny sandwiches, but also delicate linen napkins with which to dab the corners of the mouth, and, he guessed, an abundance of thick towels in the bathroom which he had never visited. And her tone gave such weight and substance to her often banal conversation that he was almost tempted to take her at her own valuation, halfway between pillar of the community and grande dame. This, no doubt, was how she impressed her neighbours.

Their regular meetings constituted a pretence, or rather a performance, but conducted without irony, and therefore

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honourable. Reality was very different, reality was solitude, a consciousness of being left out, of being uncared for. Reality for her was a matter of much vaunted popularity to which she chose to give credence, although he suspected that it was largely fictitious. Nevertheless she had stimulated her acquaintances into a guilty realization that she deserved attention of a sort, an invitation to dinner, an evening telephone call, at the very least an enquiry about her health. Reality for him was absence, colleagues with whom he had been on good terms throughout long unstinting years, friends who had moved away on their retirement and whom he no longer saw. Reality was above all his small flat which never managed to qualify as home. It had been perfectly adequate as a place to which to return after a day's work, but now that he occupied it all day it never failed to depress him. It was pleasantly situated, overlooked a wide palatial crescent of fine houses; the address was enviable, yet he had never managed to avoid a feeling of displacement from his original lacklustre home in Camberwell, though that had been far from happy, his parents tight-lipped with antagonism, and relief from their disharmony only to be sought in sleep, or in fantasies about the life he would lead when old enough to seek his freedom. Or indeed to leave home, though, strangely enough, home it had remained. Now those fantasies had been made good: he was on his own, in comfortable circumstances, yet intimately distressed by his inability to take these circumstances for granted, and uneasy, daily, until he could get out into the streets, in search of someone on whom to bestow his smile.

He had to admit that the flat had formed part of his early ambitions, his innocent snobbery. Crescent Mansions: the address had a noble ring to it, as if he were a character in Galsworthy or Conan Doyle. But, again, reality was different. Reality was above all his small silent back bedroom, which no

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woman had visited for longer than he cared to remember. This bedroom was the focal point of his disaffection, the room that disclosed his condition to him most readily. It had a quietness that any rational person would envy, but it made him feel helpless. If he cried out (but he would never do such a thing) no one would hear him. If he were taken ill there would be no one at hand, this despite the existence of neighbours with whom he was on nodding and of course smiling terms. But these neighbours were mostly young and went off to work every day; when they returned they had other activities, other friends to share their thoughts. Their sleep was no doubt untroubled, while his own hovered on the edge of nightmare.

And on Sundays the quiet was particularly oppressive. This Sunday was no different from all the others. A light rain had begun to fall, and for a while he stood at the window and looked out at the pavement. In due course he would scramble a couple of eggs. Then a blessed hour with a book – *The Great Gatsby*, which he was enjoying for the second or third time – and then bed. And somehow he would reassemble himself and gather his resources for the week ahead.

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He supposed that there were others like himself who slipped uneventfully through their lives to an age at which nothing more was possible, that there were few choices to be made, and at which chastity was no longer a burden but remained a source of regret. 'You're too *nice*!' was the angry accusation hurled at him by the second of his two great loves, to whom his faithful attendance had proved stultifying. His bewilderment remained long after their affair had ended. He had thought his mild manners inoffensive, but it seemed that niceness was a shameful and unexciting condition, and that women were more likely to succumb to humiliating treatment, to brute attraction, or, at the very least, to some kind of provocation. But his goal had always been a domestic one, in spite of, or more likely because of, the lack of familial sweetness to which he had never become accustomed. Love and work: Freud's prescription for contentment was one he embraced wholeheartedly. He would have been a faithful husband as he had been a faithful employee. Even now the lure of other people's arrangements was hard to withstand; the lighted windows that tempted him seemed to invite not only speculation, though that was always present, but longing. His ever-present smile was an attempt to disguise his dismay at being denied so much. 'You're only so nice because you're repressing a great deal of anger,' this same woman had told him. He had said nothing, but for possibly the first time in his life had felt the anger of which he was accused. There was nothing he could do or say. Niceness was branded into him like a birth-

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mark. And yet he had not sought it, and was somehow saddened by a condition which had earned him so few favours.

After that he had given up on the idea of marriage, the only state he was able to envisage, apparently disqualified by this disabling characteristic which was invisible to himself but glaringly obvious to others, to women in particular. He had filled his life with his work at the bank, where no one seemed to think him anomalous and where his undemanding steadiness was, if anything, an advantage. Colleagues, many of whom were congenial, had filled his days, making his return every evening to the flat less onerous than it was to become in the days of unwanted leisure. He did not even regret his early ambition to study art, although the Camberwell Art School was temptingly near at hand. His father had steered him away from its dangerous attractions and had put him in the local bank, which he saw as a prolongation of his undistinguished schooldays, not knowing that he had choices. In time he had graduated to a bigger branch in Victoria Street, where he spent the rest of his working life, subsiding into a sort of acquiescence which left his intimate dissatisfaction untouched. He had risen, modestly, to a position that ensured him a comfortable income, had invested wisely, and, long after the death of his parents, had bought his flat, and prepared to live what he thought of as a proper life. Occasionally, as he added cups and saucers, or a bedside table, or a comfortable armchair, he thought it odd that there was no one to share these activities, but looked forward to the day when he would no longer be alone. He had acquired girlfriends, for his hawkish looks promised a favourable outcome to each entanglement, and fell in love regularly, though never entirely wholeheartedly, longing for something more extreme, more transforming, than evenings at the theatre, dinners in restaurants, and visits to his flat which temporary company did little to

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